

## “Recovery”

*Rehab series.<sup>1</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent*

John 3:14-21

I got new glasses a few weeks ago, and I really love them. I didn’t always wear glasses. In fact, I got my first pair in the ninth grade. I hadn’t really known that I needed them. I would walk with my head down in the hallways, only focused on things within my short-range vision. Then one day I had to walk to the front of my geometry class to read the problem on the overhead screen. My teacher advised me to go see the optometrist. Sure enough, I got my first pair of coke-bottle 90’s glasses. The transformation was amazing! It was like I had recovered my eyesight. There were so many things I could see – walking down the hallway at school, I picked up my head, because I could see the end of the hall and the water stains on the ceiling; I could even recognize my friends walking towards me. Everything was crystal clear, like a spotlight was shining on it.

In the past few weeks, we have been talking about how Lent is like Rehab for Christians. This is forty days of intentional reflection where we bare ourselves before God, sometimes with painful confessions and realizations of how weak and broken we are. We are trying to bring the dark parts of our souls into the light of Jesus, to regain our heavenly eyesight as we prepare for Easter Sunday.

I think most of us would agree today that our world seems filled with darkness and spiritual blindness. It is impossible to read the news – even in our local newspaper – without seeing some tragic story of failure or moral evil. It’s not that we never hear good news; it just seems that the bad news is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series>

overwhelming. In the face of this darkness, we seek recovery, literally and figuratively. Frankly, we want answers.

I am not much of a movie buff, but I do enjoy Star Wars. But church, let me tell you, George Lucas was not the first one to identify the battle between Good and Evil, or Darkness and Light. Open up to the first chapter of the Gospel of John and you will find these words written almost 2,000 years ago: “In him (Jesus) was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:4-5)

Darkness and Light, Good and Evil. The reason books, movies, and even news broadcasts are so popular is that we are all engaged in this conflict. We want the Light to win. We want a renewed vision, a different prescription, and I believe in the Gospel of John, we do find answers.

We are not alone in our search. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a teacher of the Jews, and he was looking for answers himself, so one night he went to Jesus. The conversation started out great: Nicodemus complimented Jesus, calling him a teacher from God and noting that Jesus performed miracles or “signs” that really proved who he was. In fact, I think Nicodemus was just about to ask his first question when Jesus offered this statement:

John 3:3 - “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Now, the Greek word for “again” in this passage can also mean “from above.” There is an intentional double-meaning going on here. Jesus is talking about heavenly things, and Nicodemus takes it to mean earthly things. In fact, he tells Jesus, it is impossible to be born a second time, literally.

But notice something. Jesus talks about “seeing” the kingdom of God. If we have the right vision, if we are born from above, we can see God’s kingdom.

That's a good thing. We want to see the kingdom of heaven. Really, Nicodemus does, too, so he asks Jesus to explain himself further. (John 3:9)

At this point, we pick up the passage where we read it today. Jesus launches into a sermon about light and darkness, good and evil. Jesus makes an obscure reference to Numbers 21, something about Moses lifting up a snake. That's not a common Sunday School story, so allow me to read the full passage that Jesus is referring to.

#### Numbers 21:4-9

<sup>4</sup>They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup>they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

<sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup>The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

<sup>8</sup>The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." <sup>9</sup>So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Israel was going through a rehab as well. A 40-year program in the wilderness, and many times, their vision was obscured as well. In fact, this story was the fourth time that Israel had rebelled against God. They were grumbling, they were complaining. Sounds an awful lot like people in our world today, doesn't it?

So God sent snakes to punish the Israelites, who came running back to Moses. They made their confession in a hurry: We screwed up! Now save us!

And God told Moses to make a bronze snake, put it on a pole, and have the Israelites “lift up” their gaze to it and be healed.

That phrase, “lift up,” is where Jesus makes the connection. When the Israelites lifted up their gaze, when they reset their vision, they found recovery. Jesus tells Nicodemus, this is a prophecy concerning himself. The Son of Man will be lifted up, and he will save those who believe in him. Think of how bizarre that really sounds. You must lift up your head to gaze at something that is despised, and by doing so, you will be healed and saved.

Jesus goes on to give us the new prescription, the new vision. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” John 3:16. Maybe you’ve heard it once or twice. In fact, maybe you have heard it so often, you’ve forgotten how amazing that offer really is.

I have three children. I love them very much. And the fact is, even though I love you all, I would never be willing to offer one of my own children as a sacrifice to save you. I highly doubt any of you parents would find any fault in that.

But here is the shocking thing: God did offer his own Son. In a strange, Trinitarian way that we cannot fully comprehend, God Incarnate – God in the flesh – the Son, Jesus Christ, died for us. How much darkness does our sin create, and yet the light of Christ heals us? That’s amazing. Romans 5:8 says God did this without our approval or even our awareness: “God proves His love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” That is amazing. We don’t deserve God’s love, but we get it. And this offer is for the whole world.

Here is the thing, though. Recovery does not come easy, and most times, it does not come all at once. While I fully believe that the only thing we have to do

to be saved is trust in Jesus, I rarely see someone come to faith in an instant. Instead, it is usually a journey, a long process with stops and starts.

Jesus points out plainly that mankind loves the dark. I know this. I used to play a game called “Bloody Murder” – it was a kind of scary hide-and-go-seek – but my friends and I would only play it after dark. Why? It was no fun to play during the day. There were no good places to hide.

Jesus tells us that many of us like the dark. We like harboring our sin in secret. We don’t come out to the light easily. When we step into the light of Jesus, we feel exposed, condemned. There is one thing that light always does: it reveals. And that is uncomfortable. In the movies, it’s OK to cheer for the Darth Vader and all the baddies, but in real life, we don’t want to admit that is who we are.

That’s why we need to memorize John 3:17 as well. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” We need to know that when we trust in Christ, we are no longer condemned. Our sin is taken away. But to get there, we have to be honest with Jesus. We have to be open. We have to admit, “Jesus, I’m arrogant, prideful, willful, wrong, and sinful.” When we finally admit that, we step into the light of grace. We get a new vision. We can begin recovery, sanctification.

Recovery is not about having all the right answers. We don’t have them. How many times in life do you feel like you are at the end of your rope? You have reached your limit. Your anxiety is high, your despair is deep, your heartbreak is wide. At that point, you need the Light to step in.

I want to speak to three different kinds of people right now. I’m hoping you find yourself somewhere on this spectrum.

First, you might be someone who frankly doesn't believe anything I've said just now, or anything we just read. OK. You are still welcome here, of course. But I must ask, what is your option to overcome the darkness? Where do you find hope? If you try to rely on yourself or even your friends, you will eventually find yourself disappointed, because none of us are perfect. So I have a simple prayer for you: Ask Jesus to reveal himself to you. Ask him to show you that he is real. Read John chapter 20, the story of the disciple Thomas. He made that simple request. He said, "Unless I see the nail marks in [Jesus'] hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25) And you know what? Jesus honored that request. So simply pray, "Jesus, show yourself to me."

Second, you might be someone who knows this truth, but you still live in the darkness of fear. I know, I experience this now and then. If you are like that, let this truth sink in again. Read John 3:16-17, and every time it says "the world," replace that with your own name. "God so loved \_\_\_\_, that he sent his only Son, that if \_\_\_\_ believes in him, \_\_\_\_ will have eternal life. God did not send his son into the world to condemn \_\_\_\_, but to save \_\_\_\_." Get real with God. Confess and believe, and receive that new vision.

Lastly, you might be someone who thinks they have it all together. "Hey, pastor, I've been a Christian longer than you've been alive. I'm good." OK. Yet I believe every one of us still has some darkness we need to confess. Otherwise, why would we celebrate Lent every year? But even if you already do that, you need to know, our job is to reflect the light of Jesus back into the world. A light that is absorbed is no good. But a light that is reflected is shared, and illuminates the way for all. That's why I am so serious about these Easter invitations. Take

another one. Share it. None of us can stand here and say we love Jesus if we know the Light and have not shared it with someone else. If we are serious about calling ourselves disciples of Christ, then we must go when he says, "Go." We cannot hide in the dark, inside these four walls, thinking we are safe. If we have found recovery, we must share the cure.

You know, one of my favorite miracle stories is the healing of the blind man. Jesus proclaimed part of his purpose was to help the blind recover their sight and preach the good news to the poor. (Luke 4:18) Maybe Jesus isn't just talking about physical blindness, but spiritual blindness, too. Let's be a church that helps people recover their vision. Let's be a church that helps people find hope and light. Let's be a church that helps people see Jesus. Amen.

Memory Verse: John 3:17

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..."

Reflection Questions:

1. How good is your eyesight? How do you feel when you don't have your glasses, or when you are in the dark?
2. Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark? What might he have feared?
3. What do you think about John 3:17, that Jesus did not come into the world to condemn it? Why do people feel condemned?
4. Why do you think people love darkness instead of the light?
5. What do you need to do to confess your darkness?
6. How can you show the light of Jesus to someone else?